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ABSTRACT

A transactional investigation of reading considers comprehension to be more than the duplication of the author's message. Rather, it entails the readers' interpretation of the textual representation that he or she has constructed. Thus, researchers must ask how the reader duplicated the author's creative role. The goal, in other words, is to investigate the processes that give rise to the reader's interpretation. This can be done through an ethnographic mode of inquiry. Ethnographies permit the researcher to study all that the reader brings to reading such as attitudes, interests, and instructional history, as well as the definition the reader ascribes to the event as a whole. Ethnographies also allow for open-ended attitudes--hypotheses that are not formulated a priori, but instead are generated and revised in the course of field work. Furthermore, ethnography, like reading, is itself a transactional process. Not unlike reading, beliefs and actions are pulled from the stream of experience so that they may be evaluated and developed. Thus, ethnographies permit a mode of inquiry that is commensurate with a transactional definition of reading comprehension. (HOD)

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Transactional Theory as a Potential for Research in Literacy

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My topic today is the potential that Professor Rosenblatt's transactional theory has for research in literacy and I can find no better entre to that topic that Peirce's Pragmatic Maxim. Peirce formulated this maxim as a way to make ideas clear. He wrote:

> Consider what effects, that might conceivably have practical bearings, we conceive the object of our conception to have. Then, our conception of these effects is the whole of our conception of the object.
>
> (cited in Skagestad, 1981, p. 88)

Unlike logical positivists, who asserted that the effects of an object had to be empirical effects, Peirce held that they need only be possibilities or potential effects. My hope is that if I can point out some of the possible effects of a transactional theory, we might approach a clearer understanding of that theory. The possibilities suggested by a transactional reading theory are many so I shall limit my remarks to two issues that I see as critical to the future of reading research. The first deals with the definition of comprehension we adopt and the second focuses on the mode of inquiry we use to study it.

Much of the work on comprehension is rooted in psychological conceptions of the reading process. Reading researchers have followed the currents of academic psychology ever since Huey (1908) and Thorndike (1917) published their ground-breaking studies in the early part of the twentieth century. In the last ten years this link has become even more pronounced. The influential role cognitive psychologists have played in shaping our definition of comprehension bears witness to this situation.

An understanding of what cognitive psychologists mean by comprehension

begins with a consideration of the reading models they've developed. The term that most clearly captures the basic design of these models is "interactive." Theorists positing interactive reading models (e.g., Adams and Collins, 1979; Goodman, 1967, 1978; Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978; Rumelhart, 1977) assume that comprehension results from the interplay between a reader's knowledge (i.e., orthographic, syntactic, semantic, and world knowledge) and the linguistic organization of the text. The dyadic nature of this design can be seen in the way analytic techniques are applied to recall and summary protocols. Protocols are often parsed into meaning units (such as propositions [Turner and Greene, 1977]) and then coded according to the source of that unit (either the reader or the text). The fact that some propositions are coded as "errors" (Kintsch and van Dijk, 1978) or "intrusions" (Hansen, 1981) suggests that, within the framework of interactive models, duplication of the text is the measure of comprehension.

Although interactive models have contributed significantly to our understanding of comprehension, there exist a number of problems with these models that result from the subject/object dualism inherent in their design. The transactional theory developed by Professor Rosenblatt explicitly rejects this dualism. In The Reader, the Text, the Poem (1978) she notes that the term 'transaction' was selected over 'interaction' because interaction implies "separate...entities acting on one another" (p. 17) whereas transaction suggests "an ongoing process in which elements or factors are...aspects

of a total situation, each conditioned by and conditioning the other" (p. 17). Consequently, a transactional account of what happens when reader meets text is very different from that given by interactionists. Out to either the reader or the text alone. In the course of the transaction the reader establishes a proportion (cf. Iser, 1980) between him/herself and the text; this proportion, in turn, has the capacity to be taken as an object of thought, available for further evaluation and development. From this perspective, then, comprehension involves more than the duplication of the author's message; it entails the readers' interpretation of the textual representation that he/she has constructed.

The definition calls for a reconsideration of the tasks we use to assess comprehension. Earlier I mentioned recall and summary protocols; these represent two heuristics commonly used in comprehension research-heuristics that direct the reader to record the way the discourse has been represented in memory. Asking readers to recall and summarize what they've read may help us understand memorial processing but these tasks offer only a truncated view of what a reader has made of the experience. There is a need, then, to search for tasks that invite readers to make their interpretations public. This might be accomplished by asking them to talk or write about what the text has brought to mind. We might even consider using other communication systems like art and drama to tap readers' understanding. But whatever the tasks, we must shift conceptual gears

and ask a new question. Rather than asking how the reader duplicated the author's message, we must ask how the reader duplicated the author's creative role. The goal, in other words, is to investigate the processes that give rise to the reader's interpretation.

This brings me to my second point, namely, the mode of inquiry we use to study comprehension. If we accept a transactional perspective on reading and take seriously the goal of investigating the processes that give rise to the reader's interpretation, then we must turn to an ethnographic mode of inquiry. Up to this point, I have described the reading transaction as if it took place in a social and cultural vacuum. This is misleading for context plays a significant role in shaping the meanings that are made. I hesitate to use the term 'context' in this way lest it be interpreted as the physical setting in which the transaction occurs; nor is context a variable that can be added into a regression equation. The sense of 'context' intended here is more dynamic and suggests that the relation of text to context is dialectical in nature (cf. Cook, Gumperz and Corsaro, 1977).

Ethnographies thus permit the researcher to study the "whole cloth" of the reading transaction. And part of that cloth is the reader's perspective on the the reading event. Professor Rosenblatt reminds us that the reader brings his or her past experiences and present sensibilities to the tra..s-

action. These include the reader's attitudes, interests and instructional history as well as the definition the reader ascribes to the event as a whole. This last point is important because it is always possible that the reader might define the situation as something other than a reading event (e.g., an evaluation event); if the researcher does not investigate this question the validity of the data will be threatened.

Ethnographies also serve the goals of reading researchers because the attitude they engender is open-ended. Hypotheses are not formulated a priori but instead are generated and revised in the course of fieldwork. The assumption is that this stance will enable the ethnographer to explain the entire range of data and not just those that hover around the central tendency. Anomolies, those data that seem not to "fit," thus play an important role in the ethnographic enterprise; rather than being thrown out as "outliers" these data force the researcher to rethink initial hypotheses. In this way ethnography builds a self-correcting feedback loop into the inquiry process. This doesn't mean that ethnographers enter the field as blank slates for research is always theoretically based, whether or not the theory is made explicit; indeed, this is the lesson Kuhn (1970) has taught us. But it does mean that the ethnographer keeps an open mind. It may be that the "errors" and "intrusions" found in recall and summary protocols are indices of some aspect of the reader's interpretation.

To say that an ethnographer must keep an open mind is too simple, though, for it offers no insights as to how such open-mindedness is achieved. It is more useful, I think, to argue that ethnographers must practice reflexivity. Practicing reflexivity means that the ethnographer explores his or her own role in the event (Herzfeld, 1981). Stated another way, the ethnographer continually takes his/her beliefs and actions as objects of thought. In a process not unlike reading, beliefs and actions are pulled from the stream of experience in order that they may be evaluated and developed. Reflexivity thus acknowledges that data are fictions, not because they are invalid, but because they are things made by the ethnographer and the participants in concert. This simply means that ethnography is itself a transactional process. If ethnographers disavow this characteristic and attempt to edit themselves out of the text, so to speak, they will be in danger of accepting subject/object dualism (cf. Sebeok and Umiker-Sebeok, 1981). To be sure, reflexivity complicates an already complex process, but as in writing things probably have to "get messy" before they can become clear. In short, an ethnographic mode of inquiry offers us a way to map out what Geertz (1973) would call a thick description of comprehension, and it is for this reason that I believe ethnography is worth the consideration of the reading profession.

In this brief paper, I have tried to sketch out what it might mean

to investigate reading as a transaction. It seems to me that a transactional theory challenges us to rethink our definition of comprehension and employ a mode of inquiry that is commensurate with that definition. If we accept this challenge we might be in a better position to make our idea of reading clear. The hope, of course, is that such clarity will help us provide experiences for students that will unleash their potential within school walls.

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